

Leading Beyond Barriers: Creating Impact in an Age of Polycrisis

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Executive Summary

In an age of polycrisis¹—where interconnected crises amplify one another—leaders must overcome systemic barriers to implement solutions that deliver meaningful and sustainable progress. This paper identifies key obstacles to such progress, including entrenched belief systems that disconnect individuals from systemic issues and collective action challenges that hinder collaboration. By drawing on historical examples such as the eradication of smallpox and the near-elimination of polio, we highlight essential components for addressing systemic challenges: technological capability, cross-boundary collaboration, sustained engagement, and scalable resources. However, it is the human dimension—shaped by beliefs, awareness, and social barriers—that often determines the success or failure of these efforts.

To address these challenges, we propose actionable strategies rooted in systems thinking and organizational learning. These strategies focus on creating shared Direction, Alignment, and Commitment (DAC) among stakeholders and applying established frameworks like the Change Equation ($D \times V \times F > R$) to inspire and sustain action. Through encouraging direct participation, fostering a sense of ownership, and scaling small wins, the paper outlines how leaders can overcome systemic, social, and belief-based barriers to drive meaningful action. By addressing these complexities head-on, leaders can navigate today's interconnected crises and build the conditions for long-term, sustainable progress.



¹ See *What is a Global Polycrisis* by M. Lawrence, S. Janzwood, and T Homer-Dixon, 2022

Introduction

CCL's recent [research](#) identifies the critical leadership capabilities needed to navigate interconnected crises—from complex problem-solving and collaboration to transformative leadership and future orientation. These capabilities are particularly crucial as leaders face what scholars term a “polycrisis”—a situation where multiple, simultaneous crises interact through interconnected systems in ways that amplify their impact and complicate potential solutions. The successful deployment of these leadership capabilities depends heavily on understanding and addressing the systemic barriers that can impede their effectiveness. Even the most skilled and prepared leaders face significant headwinds when attempting to drive meaningful change in the face of deeply rooted belief systems and social barriers that resist collective action.

This thought-leadership piece examines the often hidden but powerful barriers to intervening in systemic issues and provides strategies to overcome these barriers. Drawing on our experience developing leadership, conducting research, and applying theories, we aim to equip leaders with the insights and tools to catalyze positive change amidst a landscape of instability and chronic disruption. Where our work illuminates what individual [leaders need to navigate a polycrisis](#) effectively, this paper reveals why those same leaders will struggle to gain traction and how individuals and organizations must evolve to enable success.

Learning from Past Success

While many systemic challenges appear intractable, examining historical successes provides a crucial foundation for understanding what actually works. Despite decades of coordinated global effort, many of today's most pressing systemic challenges—from climate change to poverty—remain stubbornly resistant to solutions. Yet history offers hope that transformative global action is possible.² By exploring these rare but significant victories, we can identify the essential components that enabled systemic change before examining the barriers that typically prevent such success.

Solution Requirements

Solutions to systemic crises require four basic components: *technological capability, increased collaboration, sustained engagement, and scaled resources*.

Technological capability includes two types of know-how. The first is the science that provides a feasible fix for what is missing, broken, or needed to solve the problem. In the case of polio, this was the creation of a viable vaccine, the manufacture of which could be scaled and distributed around the world. The second kind of know-how is a workable plan for how to put the technology to practical use.

Increased collaboration aligns disparate but interested parties who are motivated to achieve a goal. The [Global Polio Eradication Initiative](#) exemplifies this, bringing together the WHO, UNICEF, Rotary International, CDC, and national governments in an unprecedented partnership. As with many systemic crises, tens or hundreds of groups often share an interest in solving the problem but have failed to come together to back a single approach to moving forward that promises to be effective.

Sustained engagement requires maintaining consistent focus and follow-through from all participating entities over extended periods of time. The complexity of systemic challenges demands long-term commitment beyond initial agreements and declarations of intent. This is evident in global climate change conferences where parties come together to produce shared agreements that often fail to translate into sustained action by their respective entities. Similarly, the challenge of achieving “sustained peace” demonstrates how maintaining long-term engagement remains elusive amid recurring cycles of conflict driven by real or perceived injustice.

Scaled resources include not only funding but the commitment of human energy from full and part-time engaged contributors. Given the scope of the most significant and complex systemic challenges, scaling resources equal to the task is a requirement that is difficult to bring to fruition.

² Efforts to eradicate polio and smallpox have been studied extensively for lessons applicable to our current challenges, and we will draw upon them as we formulate recommendations for action.

Our mission as leaders is to create the conditions that allow solutions to systemic crises to be formulated and carried out. The four solution components, however, face significant human-centered obstacles

that can impede their implementation and success. To achieve these conditions, we must understand the barriers that stand in our way and how those barriers can be overcome.

Understanding the Human Dimension

To solve complex systemic crises, both technological and human conditions must be addressed. As social scientists, we can offer little on the purely scientific breakthroughs that must be achieved to slow climate change or advancements in agriculture that would allow us to end global hunger. However, it is within our purview to opine on the human contributions to our current state of affairs.

Some of the most pernicious blockages to progress derive from human tendencies which, if not addressed, will continue to overpower our collective resolve to take effective action. These human barriers fall into two broad categories: belief systems and social barriers that hinder our collective action.



Belief Barriers

Obstacles to shifting individual mindsets from disconnection to connection with systemic crises



Collective Action Barriers

Obstacles to coordinated group action

FIGURE 1

A belief is an internalized assumption about what is “true” and “real” in the world. They are the products of aligned individual assumptions rather than independent phenomena. To **engage** in sustained collaboration to address systemic crises, we must shift our individual beliefs from disconnection to connection. We must cease viewing crises as distant from ourselves and, therefore, not needing our immediate attention. Instead, we must realize that our contribution is vital and that finding an effective way to contribute is among the highest priorities to our continued existence, on par with putting food on the table, raising our children, and discovering the true meaning of life. We must come to view “the problem” as “my problem” and not only volunteer our time and energy to assist but commit to sustained engagement in leading efforts to find better paths forward.

We cannot solve complex systemic crises on our own; we need the help of others. Therefore, the second set of human barriers to overcome are those limiting our collective social action. Overcoming social barriers to collective action is critical but notoriously difficult. In almost every initiative involving collaboration, we are likely to encounter behaviors from others that discourage us from staying the course, working through our differences, or seeing the effort required as worth the cost. We might observe the fragility of collaborative arrangements throughout human history and conclude that collaboration isn’t a part of our DNA. Yet, to successfully address systemic crises, we need to develop entirely new levels of capability for being and working together. Rather than just commending those who sacrifice their lives on our behalf, we must all be willing to sacrifice, or risk finding that we may not be able to live at all.

Part 1: Belief Barriers

As stated, to initiate and sustain engagement in systemic crises, a shift must occur from disconnection to connection, thus seeing the crisis as mine rather than someone else's. Many barriers to this shift can be traced directly to our individual belief systems. These barriers—rooted in ideologies, levels of awareness, and confidence in finding solutions—must be understood and addressed. We view these as hierarchical in their influence, shaping the extent to which we can connect ourselves to these challenges and ultimately engage in sustained collective action.



Belief Barriers

Obstacles to shifting individual mindsets from disconnection to connection

Includes: Ideological, Level of Awareness, and Confidence Barriers

FIGURE 2

Ideological Barriers

Ideologies are systems of ideas, beliefs, and values that shape worldviews, goals, expectations, and actions across a wide range of situations. They tend to be stable and consistent as they are shaped by values, norms, and historical contexts. Belief systems of dominant cultural groups define what seem possible and can make structural reforms and ethical shifts appear unimaginable. Most importantly, they predispose us to pay attention to some issues and not to others. Before we can become concerned with systemic crises and begin the journey toward making them our own, we must be predisposed to view them as relevant and important. If our ideology rejects the importance of a crisis out of hand, it's unlikely that we will become more aware of its harmful consequences, overcome our self-interests to work with others to address it, or believe that a solution is even possible.

Ideological Barriers to Interventions

Barrier #1: Neoliberalism

Prioritization of short-term profits over collective welfare

What It Means

Putting personal and organizational welfare ahead of others, despite potential long-term harm to all parties

How It Manifests

- Deregulation, austerity measures, and reduced social spending
- Relaxed rules for corporate profit maximization
- Privatization of essential services like healthcare
- Tax cuts for wealthy and flexible labor markets

Leadership Impact

"Me first" mentality severely undercuts collective action, making those who sacrifice for the greater good feel that they have been taken advantage of by those who reap benefits for themselves at the expense of others.

Barrier #2: Scientism

Overreliance on science and technology as universal solution

What It Means

The belief that science and technology alone can solve all societal problems, while dismissing other forms of knowledge and wisdom

How It Manifests

- Promoting narrow, oversimplified analyses of complex interconnected issues
- Prioritizing technical fixes over necessary ethical and paradigm shifts
- Defining expertise exclusively through scientific credentials

- Excluding indigenous knowledge and community experience
- Passively waiting for technological solutions rather than taking action

Leadership Impact

The “science will save us” mentality undermines urgency for immediate action and personal responsibility, while marginalizing diverse perspectives and alternative forms of wisdom that could contribute to holistic solutions.

Barrier #3: Human Exceptionalism

Belief in humanity’s right to dominate and exploit nature

What It Means

Viewing humans as separate from and superior to nature, justifying unlimited exploitation of natural resources without considering ecological consequences

How It Manifests

- Over-exploitation of natural resources like forests and oceans
- Application of weaker ethical standards to animals and ecosystems
- Treatment of nature as property to be extracted and exploited
- Disregard for future generations and other species
- Industrial and farming practices that prioritize profit over environmental impact

Leadership Impact

Like neoliberalism, this “humans first” mindset undermines collective action by privileging immediate human interests over long-term planetary wellbeing, making it difficult to address systemic environmental crises that require coordinated, interdependent solutions.

Barrier #4: Fatalism

Belief that outcomes are predetermined and individual actions don’t matter

What It Means

A cultural mindset characterized by feelings of powerlessness and lack of control, leading to disengagement from addressing challenges

How It Manifests

- Low employee motivation and sense of responsibility
- Dismissal of solution-seeking behaviors
- Continuation of “business as usual” despite known problems
- Resigned acceptance of negative outcomes
- Suppression of curiosity and creative problem-solving

Leadership Impact

The “nothing can be done” mentality paralyzes action and innovation by convincing people their efforts are futile, effectively blocking the awareness, hope, and activism needed to address pressing challenges and find workable solutions.



Level of Awareness Barriers

Effectively addressing complex issues means we must perceive them as subjects warranting attention and resources. Awareness barriers include apathy, excessive pride, cognitive obstacles, and information overload.

Barrier #5: Apathy

Public indifference and disengagement from collective challenges

What It Means

A widespread lack of civic engagement and action, driven by various factors including consumption habits, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism

How It Manifests

- Prioritizing convenience and price over environmental impact
- Consumer reluctance to change purchasing behaviors
- Business hesitation to invest in sustainable practices
- Incremental rather than transformative changes
- Compassion fatigue from constant negative news exposure

Leadership Impact

The “why bother” mentality creates a destructive cycle where public indifference discourages businesses from making sustainable changes, while business inaction reinforces public cynicism about the possibility of meaningful change, hampering progress on urgent collective challenges.

Barrier #6: Excessive Pride

Overconfidence in one’s beliefs, group identity, or perceived entitlements

What It Means

A mindset characterized by excessive pride in personal, group, or national beliefs that prevents acknowledging systemic problems and necessary reforms

How It Manifests

- Nationalist resistance to global cooperation
- Hubristic faith in human superiority over nature
- Psychological blocks to recognizing ecological interdependence
- Rejection of sustainable practices due to entitlement beliefs
- Resistance to acknowledging systemic injustices

Leadership Impact

The “we know best” mentality creates barriers to effective problem-solving by preventing honest assessment of issues, blocking necessary cooperation across groups, and maintaining harmful beliefs about human entitlement to exploit natural resources.

Barrier #7: Cognitive Obstacles

Psychological biases that interfere with understanding and addressing systemic issues

What It Means

Mental shortcuts and biases that lead to flawed decision-making and inconsistent behaviors when facing complex sustainability issues

How It Manifests

- Prioritizing immediate rewards over long-term consequences
- Seeking information that only confirms existing beliefs
- Dismissing evidence that conflicts with personal worldviews
- Downplaying the severity of environmental threats
- Inconsistent actions that undermine sustainability efforts

Leadership Impact

The “mental shortcuts” mindset compromises effective decision-making by allowing psychological biases to override objective analysis, leading to actions that prioritize immediate gratification over long-term sustainability and resistance to evidence that challenges existing beliefs.

Barrier #8: Information Overload

Paralysis caused by excessive data and constant information flow

What It Means

The overwhelming flood of information from multiple sources that hinders clear decision-making and meaningful action on important issues

How It Manifests

- Uncertainty paralysis in organizational decision-making
- Viral spread of false or misleading information
- Difficulty distinguishing reliable facts from misinformation
- Reduced time for critical reflection and analysis
- Numbing effect that diminishes interest in problem-solving

Leadership Impact

The “information tsunami” mindset creates decision paralysis by overwhelming leaders with conflicting data and opinions, making it difficult to identify reliable information and ultimately leading to reduced engagement with critical issues that require focused attention and action

Confidence Barriers

Even if issues are considered important and one becomes more convinced of the importance of one’s involvement in solving the problem, a lack of confidence in finding a workable way forward can undermine one’s willingness to try. With little or no confidence, the motivation to engage in the heavy lifting required by collective social action is unlikely to follow. The barriers that undermine one’s confidence in solutions include distrust in science, the polarization of science, and issue complexity.

Barrier #9: Distrust in Science

Growing skepticism and dismissal of scientific expertise and evidence

What It Means

A trend of increasing public distrust in scientific findings, fueled by technical language barriers, misinformation campaigns, and views that science threatens personal beliefs or interests

How It Manifests

- Dismissal of scientific expertise and evidence
- Resistance to scientific findings that challenge interests
- Prolonged acceptance of harmful practices despite evidence
- Industry efforts to discredit threatening research
- Delayed implementation of evidence-based reforms

Leadership Impact

The “science skepticism” mindset undermines effective problem-solving by ignoring crucial evidence, as demonstrated by the tobacco industry’s decades-long campaign to dismiss research linking smoking to cancer, delaying vital public health interventions.

Barrier #10: Politicization of Science

Transformation of scientific facts into partisan issues

What It Means

The entanglement of scientific findings with political ideologies, undermining objective decision-making and evidence-based reforms

How It Manifests

- Partisan division over scientific findings
- Spread of belief-confirming misinformation
- Strict regulations based on political rather than scientific grounds
- Regulatory uncertainty affecting business decisions
- Increased costs and missed opportunities

Leadership Impact

The “political tribalism” mindset corrupts evidence-based decision-making by allowing partisan beliefs to override scientific facts, creating business uncertainty and hampering effective policy responses to critical issues.

Barrier #11: Issue Complexity

Systemic, interconnected challenges that resist simple solutions

What It Means

The presence of “wicked problems” where straightforward interventions often create unintended consequences due to complex system interconnections

How It Manifests

- Quick fixes that shift rather than solve problems
- Interconnected challenges like talent retention and workplace climate
- Multiple overlapping issues requiring simultaneous attention
- Uncertainty leading to decision paralysis
- Difficulty addressing root causes of problems

Leadership Impact

The “it’s too complex” mindset leads to avoidance of difficult decisions and reliance on superficial solutions that fail to address root causes of systemic challenges, particularly in areas like organizational diversity and equity.



Part 2: Barriers to Collective Action

The shift from “the problem” to “my problem” is but the first step in creating the context required to address systemic issues. The second and harder step is fashioning a path forward that draws upon the collective actions of others. The barriers to collective action are formidable, which explains why we have seen so little progress in solving systemic challenges, despite the technical capability and inclination of many individuals to do so. The most important of these barriers involve vested interests, disagreement on solutions, and the lack of collective will.



Collective Action Barriers

Obstacles to coordinated group action

Includes: Vested Interests, Disagreement on Solutions, and Lack of Collective Will

FIGURE 3

Barrier #12: Vested Interests

Resistance from organizations benefiting from current systems

What It Means

Organizations actively working to maintain their power and profits by blocking changes that could benefit society but threaten their interests

How It Manifests

- Fossil fuel companies spreading climate misinformation
- Industry lobbying against environmental regulations
- Financial sector resistance to economic reforms
- Corporate influence over government policy
- Systematic obstruction of progress by powerful industries

Leadership Impact

The “protect our interests” mindset enables powerful organizations to block necessary systemic changes, perpetuating and worsening crises by prioritizing corporate dominance over collective wellbeing.

Barrier #13: Disagreement on Solutions

Diverse stakeholders with conflicting objectives and interpretations of problems

What It Means

Complex issues bring together stakeholders with varying perspectives, priorities, and definitions of both problems and solutions

How It Manifests

- Contrasting priorities between companies and customers in crisis situations
- Different interpretations of migration causes and solutions
- Competing disciplinary perspectives on complex issues
- Tension between business interests and public welfare
- Conflicting stakeholder definitions of root causes

Leadership Impact

The “competing priorities” mindset complicates problem-solving by creating tensions between stakeholders, requiring leaders to navigate diverse viewpoints while seeking common ground for effective solutions.



Barrier #14: Lack of Collective Will

Systemic incentives that favor individual inaction over collective action

What It Means

The difficulty of mobilizing coordinated action when individual incentives encourage self-interested behavior or passive observation

How It Manifests

- Exploitation of shared resources due to individual self-interest (tragedy of the commons)
- Short-term thinking driven by election cycles

- Bystander effect in collective action situations
- Fear of retribution for challenging powerful interests
- Competition undermining sustainable practices

Leadership Impact

The “someone else’s responsibility” mindset creates a paralysis where individual actors, despite recognizing the need for change, wait for others to take action first, leading to collective inaction on critical issues.

Part 3: Breaking Through – Strategies Overcoming Barriers

Few approaches to date have successfully overcome the resisting forces applied by human-centered barriers to action. Here, we call attention to high-leverage strategies that have the potential to unlock frozen progress. These strategies are characterized by their ability to address multiple barriers simultaneously by tackling the underlying structures, mindsets, and incentives, rather than treating symptoms in isolation. This approach emerges from the fields of systems thinking,³ organizational learning,⁴ and complexity science.⁵ While high-leverage strategies are grounded in theoretical frameworks and have been used in various contexts, there is no definitive proof that these strategies will always work as intended. The complex and dynamic nature of the systems in which these strategies are applied means that outcomes are inherently uncertain and context-dependent. Despite these uncertainties, high-leverage strategies remain a valuable framework for guiding strategic interventions in complex systems. By focusing on the underlying drivers and interconnections that shape system behavior, these strategies offer a more holistic and potentially impactful approach than narrow, piecemeal solutions. They encourage us to think beyond short-term, symptomatic fixes and to grapple with the deeper, more systemic forces at play.

To develop high-leverage strategies, we turned to the science of change in human systems for inspiration. We applied two popular and established frameworks: [Direction – Alignment – Commitment \(DAC\)](#)TM and the formula for change. Understanding these frameworks is crucial before diving into our strategic recommendations - they reveal the hidden dynamics that determine whether change efforts succeed or collapse. Leaders who grasp these fundamentals can

not only better implement the strategies we present but also use them to diagnose and correct course when their own change initiatives stall.

DAC

DAC⁶ is the result of effective leadership and a precursor to action in organizations and systems. In the context of systems crises, DAC demands particular attention from leaders who hope to catalyze diverse parties, often with competing or conflicting interests, to join in collective action.

In a situation where *Direction* is clear and mutually accepted, there are clear goals and priorities with which parties agree. There is a common purpose or vision that compels individuals to set aside some personal interests, if necessary, to support the greater good.

Typically, in complex systems requiring collaboration from parties who may not exist within a single authority structure, *Direction* evolves from conversations rather than via mandate. We witness repeated attempts to impose *Direction* by the United Nations or other global groups who lack the authority to impose their will upon those they seek to control. While these ‘top-down’ efforts may serve a useful purpose in defining goals that should be pursued, there is little actual impact from their assertions. Conferences, another popular tool in disseminating information and bringing parties together, also suffer from an inability to unite disparate parties in action.

Some degree of direction-setting success has been achieved when the parties who stand to either gain or lose the most from action are brought together to work things out with one another. Such was the case

³ See *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System* by D. H. Meadows, 1999; *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* by P.M. Senge, 1990.

⁴ See *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective* by C. Argyris and D. Schön, 1978; *Organizational Learning* by B. Levitt and J.G. March, 1988

⁵ See *Complexity and Creativity in Organizations* by Ralph Stacey, 1996

⁶ See *Direction, Alignment, Commitment: Toward a More Integrative Ontology of Leadership*, by W. H. Drath, C. D. McCauley, C. J. Palus, E. Van Velsor, P.M.G. O'Connor and J. B. McGuire, 2008

in addressing depleted fishing grounds and limiting nuclear proliferation. Success has also been achieved by bringing together those who possess both resources and pre-existing shared *Direction*, as in the case of restoring the Notre-Dame Cathedral following the devastating fire that destroyed it.

Alignment exists when parties engaged in a collaborative effort understand and accept their unique role in producing the outcomes that their shared *Direction* compels them to achieve. Many efforts at solving systemic crises fail not due to a lack of a clear and present need or danger, but rather from the parties involved not knowing what or how they are supposed to contribute.

Often, the energy sparked by a weather catastrophe, famine or war produces an immediate desire on the part of people to help. Unsure of how to do so, individuals may send money in lieu of taking engaged, sustained action, the result of which could be to deepen their understanding of the challenge and their resolve to bring about change. By calling for parties to give money rather than provide direct support, agencies imply that with additional funding, they would have the wherewithal to ameliorate the crisis which is often not the case. If instead, agencies concentrated on creating paths to more direct engagement for interested parties, the forces engaged in actual change could be multiplied.

Commitment is the result of a free and informed choice to participate in a course of action that requires some

degree of thoughtfulness, persistence, energy and sacrifice. *Commitment* cannot be ordained or bought and paid for. It can only be earned by first setting out a compelling direction, helping people align on and understand what their role in accomplishing the objective could be, and leaving it to them to choose whether the sacrifice would be worthwhile.

We have long recognized that to succeed in change, we need to help people answer the question, “What’s in it for me?” At first, with regard to systemic crises, the answer may not be evident or heartfelt. As in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, people sometimes need to go through a transformative experience before they understand why they should embrace change. Still, even the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future couldn’t force Scrooge to change; he had to come to that conclusion himself. Understanding how fundamental and universal this truth is regarding change leads us to think about the processes we must construct for parties to go through their own transformational experiences rather than bombarding them with communications telling them what they should or must do.

Moreover, it is rare for a single transformational experience to unfreeze our tightly-held beliefs and world views. As pointed out by noted learning theorists like Dewey,⁷ Lewin,⁸ Khun,⁹ and Kolb,¹⁰ most of us learn by repeating a cycle of activities, beginning with an experience that causes us to become curious about a previously held truth, experiment with new behaviors,

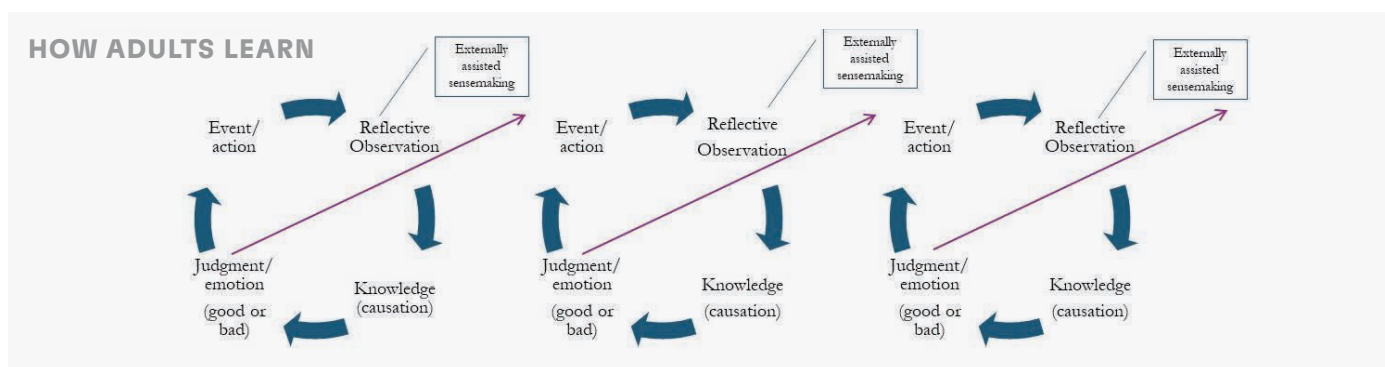


FIGURE 4

⁷ See *Experience and Education* by John Dewey, 1938

⁸ See *Field Theory in Social Science* by Kurt Lewin 1951

⁹ See *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Thomas Kuhn's, 1962

¹⁰ See *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* by David Kolb, 1984 O'Connor and J. B. McGuire, 2008

and ultimately reset the rules with which we engage the world. The diagram in Figure 4 models a continuous circular learning process with four key stages: Experiencing an event or action, which leads to Reflective Observation of what happened, followed by Developing Knowledge through identifying causal relationships, and finally Making Judgments based on emotions and evaluation of the experience. These stages form an ongoing cycle, highlighting that learning is an iterative process rather than a linear one. Additionally, the diagram introduces Externally Assisted Sensemaking (gaining insight through guidance, feedback, or social interaction), emphasizing that guidance from others can enhance reflection and deepen understanding.

The cyclical nature of transformative learning emphasizes the importance of actually taking part in solving systemic crises ourselves rather than leaving it to others. Unless we proactively engage in situations and experiences that compel us to think and act differently, we will remain unchanged, as will the world around us.

The Gleicher/Dannemiller Change Formula¹¹

The formula for change originally set forth by Gleicher and revised and popularized by Dannemiller states that the forces driving change must outweigh the forces resisting change. More specifically, the formula is $D \times V \times F > R$, where D represents the level of dissatisfaction with the current state, V the vision for the future and F the clarity of first steps to be taken.

Change Equation: $D \times V \times F > R$

Where:

D = Dissatisfaction with current state

V = Vision for the future

F = First concrete steps

R = Resistance to change

For change to occur, the combined force of Dissatisfaction, Vision, and First Steps must exceed Resistance to Change.

These forces interact multiplicatively ($D \times V \times F > R$), meaning that if any are missing or minimal, the product will be insufficient to overcome resistance. This multiplicative relationship explains why many change efforts fail – they may have strong elements of one or two forces but are missing or weak in others.

The value of the formula for change is not in its utility to precisely measure the weight of the factors in addressing a specific change challenge, but rather in reminding us to question whether we have laid the necessary groundwork for a change to succeed. In the case of systemic crises, resistance to change is huge and the change equation calls upon us to redouble our efforts to bring enough combined force in the D , V and F components to generate movement nonetheless.

Whether the subject is ending hunger or preventing future climate disasters, advertisers do a good job of reminding us what terrible shape the world is in through ads and social media posts. However, they are less clear and compelling about what's in it for us or how we might take engaged voluntary action beyond simply sending in our contributions. With more pressing competing priorities closer to home, we barely notice the same ad that we have seen many times before.

To make the D (Dissatisfaction) stronger, the message must be both personal and compelling. Whether the target of the message is an individual, an organization, a nation, or the entire world, we must overcome the many forces that prevent dissatisfaction from being felt profoundly. In the most difficult of situations, like ending addictions to alcohol or drugs, television campaigns (“Don’t smoke!”) have limited impact. Personal interventions of an intense and long-term nature by people known to and cared for by addicts are often required to break through. Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, provides a structured process for individuals to receive support from other individuals facing similar challenges. Another example is the power of the surviving students from the Parkland shooting to organize and agitate for change, driven by the deep need to address their own experiences and help others avoid the same. In every system, there are those who are deeply dissatisfied with the status quo;

¹¹ See *Changing the Way Organizations Change: A Revolution of Common Sense* by K.D. Dannemiller and R.W. Jacobs, 1992

change requires that we identify and support them by providing resources and access to power. Malala Yousafzai, the Nobel Peace Prize winner, comes to mind. In the end, changing our beliefs regarding the urgency of sustained collective action requires that we be engaged personally at an emotional level. The key high-leverage strategy for leaders of change to deal with belief barriers should, therefore, be to engage others in direct action rather than to raise money for their organizations or attempt to model courageous action on behalf of others.

To strengthen *V* (*Vision for the future*), we should note that the most compelling dreams and visions are those that we create for ourselves. Events such as the Live-Aid concerts, Black Lives Matter rallies, or Jewish-Palestinian student protests on college campuses snap us out of our stupor but do little in the long run to engage us in thinking deeply about what a compelling alternative future might be. Appreciative inquiry methods (an organizational development approach that drives positive change by identifying and building on existing strengths and successes, rather than focusing on problems), developed by Cooperrider¹² and others, incorporate a dream phase in their work on transformation to capture our most sincere hopes for a better future. Still, the processes and structures for working toward the vision (the “*F*” in the change equation) are often lacking. We lose motivation to continue dreaming if we doubt our ability to make our dreams come true.

That’s why the equation is multiplicative rather than additive. It’s not enough to be dissatisfied or to see clearly how things could be better; we also need access to the means to bring about real change. During the height of the Cold War, the [International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War](#) (IPPNW) were able to leverage their personal connections through back channels to broker confidential, off-the-record conversations between the White House and the Kremlin. Although they had no standing as private citizens, the IPPNW invented and executed a strategy with a real chance of succeeding against what had been regarded as resolute and unbending forces. For their efforts, they were awarded a Nobel Peace Prize.

Too often, we see repeated strategies that time and time again have failed to move the needle on systemic crises. Protests and conferences are wonderful for attracting attention to a problem but do little to engage people in innovative problem solving. To the extent that energy exists among well-intended actors to continue the good fight, high-leverage strategies should feature efforts to innovate new and more effective strategies rather than to pour more resources into strategies that are known not to work. Clarity regarding *F* (Future) may not occur on the first attempt of new approaches, but being involved in innovation is immeasurably more satisfying than being asked to participate in activities that are known to have limited long-term success.



¹² See *Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life* by D.L. Cooperrider and S. Srivastva, 1987

High Leverage Strategies for Solving Systemic Crises

Combining the insights gained from applying the DAC framework and change equation, here are some high-leverage strategies for overcoming the barriers to solving systemic crises.

HIGH-LEVERAGE STRATEGIES

<p>1. Take Ownership (from “It’s Not My Problem” to “It’s My Problem”) <i>Actions Shape Attitudes</i>¹³</p> <p>Core Principles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal engagement emerges as the catalyst for broader change • Hands-on experience creates pathways for sustainable transformation • Individual action precedes effective advocacy <p>Implementation Requirements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieving this step to trigger other high-leverage actions that hold promise • Direct participation opportunities in organizations 	<p>2. Drive Continuous Learning <i>Experience Builds Expertise: 70% Through Doing</i>¹⁴</p> <p>Core Principles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning emerges through repeated cycles of exposure and engagement as individuals participate in developing and implementing solutions • Experimental learning approaches build momentum through small successes, with progress emerging from active experimentation and reflection <p>Implementation Requirements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieving this step to trigger other high-leverage actions that hold promise • Direct participation opportunities in organizations¹⁵
<p>3. Multiply Small Wins into System-Wide Change <i>Small Steps, Big Shifts</i></p> <p>Core Principles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small, sustainable solutions demonstrate viability and create replicable patterns • Successful solutions (V), like lending programs and education pathways, reveal scalable models for inspiration and broader experimentation <p>Implementation Requirements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thousands of small experiments over centrally-controlled policy changes • Examples of proven successes in engaging more people in developing solutions • Growing solutions over time to produce cumulative change 	<p>4. Transform Individual Stakes into Collective Will <i>From Personal to Shared Purpose</i></p> <p>Core Principles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systemic change required multiple factors ($D \times V \times F$) with enough force to overcome resistance (R) • Global answer to the question “What’s in it for me?” • Systematically plant and grow seeds for wider social engagement through direct involvement, continuous learning, and proven successes Rather than waiting for a “conversion moment” <p>Implementation Requirements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solutions to systemic crises require technological capability, increased collaboration across boundaries, sustained engagement of the parties, and the ability to scale resources • Applying factors from political movements that have historically grown enough power to replace established systems:¹⁶ charismatic leadership, widespread dissatisfaction, effective communication, clear future opportunities, nonviolent approaches, and expanding shared beliefs

¹³ James Laing’s research demonstrated that behavior precedes attitude change, especially in situations where individuals face pressure to act in ways that conflict with their natural inclinations. See Self-Perception Theory by D.J. Bem, 1972; *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* by Leon Festinger, 1950

¹⁴ Dewey, Kolb, and Mezirow showed that adults learn primarily through experience, with decades of Center for Creative Leadership research finding that over 70% of adult learning comes from direct experience. See Perspective Transformation by Jack Mezirow, 1978 and *The Lessons of Experience: How Successful Executives Develop on the Job* by Morgan W. McCall, Michael M. Lombardo & Ann M. Morrison, 1988.

¹⁵ Change research shows 20% of engaged change agents can catalyze transformation, while 65% remain neutral bystanders and 15% resist. Success lies in empowering the engaged 20% to lead the neutral majority rather than confronting resisters. See *Experimental Evidence for Tipping Points in Social Convention* by D. Centola, J. Becker, D. Brackbill & A. Bromchelli, 2008; *Threshold Models of Collective Behavior* by M. Granovetter, 1978

¹⁶ See *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* by S. Tarrow, 2011

Technological breakthroughs can inspire confidence that change is possible and massive natural disasters or social upheavals can move dispassionate people into action. Clearly, waiting for such events to transpire is not the only road we should follow. Rather than waiting for a “conversion moment,” we can plant and then grow the seeds for wider social engagement (transforming Individual Stakes into Collective Will strategy). There are many ways in which this could be done, but for the sake of illustration, we turn to one where we have substantial experience: leadership development.

Leadership development serves as a critical force multiplier in addressing systemic crises by transforming both individual leadership capabilities and collective organizational capacity for change. Through integrated development approaches, organizations can cultivate the individual mindsets and shared capabilities needed to drive systemic transformation. The strategic advantage of comprehensive leadership development lies in its dual impact on individuals and systems. At the individual level, it helps leaders develop essential capabilities and mindsets. At the collective level, it transforms how organizational networks understand and address complex challenges. This balanced approach helps organizations move beyond relying

on heroic individual leaders while still recognizing the essential role of individuals in catalyzing and guiding systemic change.

Perhaps most importantly, leadership development serves as a crucial bridge between academic research and practical application. It involves translating theoretical frameworks like the DAC framework and Change Formula into actionable practices that resonate with leaders. Through cross-organizational networks and communities of practice, effective leadership development approaches can spread across organizations and sectors, creating the broad-based movement needed to address systemic challenges. This bridge between theory and practice ensures that insights flow both ways, enriching both academic understanding and practical application of systemic change approaches.

Leadership development is only one suggestion to create a level of engagement that could lead to a more active population coalescing to assert their influence over future decisions. We invite readers to join us in imagining others. In our view, the important thing is to adopt methods that slowly, person by person over time, begin to create a tipping point of aligned voices for change.

Conclusion

Leaders stand at a pivotal moment where the decisions they make can define how humanity navigates interconnected crises. The challenges are significant, but the opportunities to create lasting impact are equally profound. This paper calls on leaders to shift from passive observation to active engagement, recognizing that systemic crises cannot be solved without collective ownership, sustained collaboration, and a willingness to tackle deeply rooted human and organizational barriers.

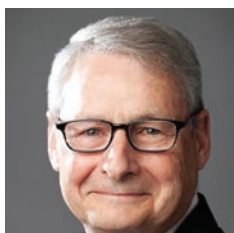
The responsibility of leadership in this context goes beyond technical solutions; it requires cultivating a shared purpose, empowering others, and demonstrating the resilience needed to navigate uncertainty. By fostering environments where small victories build momentum and collective action takes root, leaders can chart a course toward a more equitable, sustainable, and resilient future. The time for incremental thinking is over. The time for transformative leadership is now.

About the Authors



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